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The man behind the Pentagon Papers

By Bruce Ramsey

Seattle Times editorial writer

Daniel Ellsberg has released this memoir with an exquisite sense of timing. As Congress considers the third war resolution in 12 years — Iraq, Afghanistan and Iraq again — Ellsberg begins his book with its Gulf of Tonkin resolution of 1964. That was the vote authorizing Lyndon Johnson to use military force in Southeast Asia "as the president determines."

Johnson told the nation Aug. 4, 1964, that he had "unequivocal" evidence that earlier that day, North Vietnamese torpedo boats had made two "unprovoked" attacks on U.S. Navy ships "on routine patrol in international waters." Ellsberg, a Pentagon analyst who had read the dispatches from the ship's captain, knew that each one of these statements was false.

The ships had not been on a routine patrol or only in international waters. And the only contact on the second attack was radar, and the skipper suspected it was false.

"Secrets: A Memoir of Vietnam and the Pentagon Papers"

All this comes on page 12 of this remarkable book, which chronicles seven years of the Vietnam War and U.S. politics through the analytical eyes of Ellsberg.

by Daniel Ellsberg
Viking, \$29.95

Readers past the half-century mark will remember him as the man who leaked the Pentagon Papers, a top-secret history of American involvement in Vietnam. The Nixon administration tried to stop four newspapers from printing it, took it to the Supreme Court and lost. It tried to have Ellsberg sent to prison, and it lost that fight, too.

Most Americans never read the Pentagon Papers but will remember that they documented a series of government lies. Even journalists accustomed to dissemblers were shocked by it. "It became clear to me," Ellsberg writes, "that journalists had no idea, no clue, even the best of them, just how often and how egregiously they were lied to."

The theme of this book is that the fundamental problem with Vietnam policy was not lies told to the president, but lies by the president. What Ellsberg discovered in the Pentagon Papers was that all the presidents who committed resources to Vietnam — Harry Truman, Dwight Eisenhower, John Kennedy and Lyndon Johnson — had good information. The quagmire was pointed out to them, and they ignored it. Kennedy and Johnson, who made the crucial decisions, did not want to lose another country to the Communists. They were willing to take big risks, and lie about them to minimize how risky they were. By the time Ellsberg had analyzed that, a new president, Richard Nixon, was doing the same thing.

"The president was part of the problem," Ellsberg writes. "This was clearly a matter of his role, not of his personality or party." And what had allowed this to happen, he concluded, was "the concentration of power within the executive branch" that had existed since World War II.

Ellsberg was a long time in reaching these conclusions. Along the way he spent two years in Vietnam as an observer. He met old Vietnam hands and political appointees like Henry Cabot Lodge, the U.S. ambassador. He deliciously quotes Lodge, who had been Nixon's

Author appearance

Daniel Ellsberg will appear

running mate in 1960, dismissing the idea of fair elections in Vietnam by saying that Lyndon Johnson had "spent most of his life rigging elections." He met Nixon, who was equally cynical about elections, and had an intriguing moment discussing John F. Kennedy with his brother Robert.

Early on, Ellsberg's question about the war was whether America could win it. Later, it was whether America had any moral right to involve itself. As he met antiwar activists, he slowly reached the decision to "cast my whole vote" against the war by leaking classified papers belonging to the government. The last part of the book is the story of his trying to find someone to leak, to trying Sens. William Fulbright, George McGovern and Mike Gravel, and finally settling on The New York Times. The book ends with his trial — the first trial of an American for a leak.

at noon Saturday on the Richard Hugo stage of the Northwest Bookfest. He will also read at 7 p.m. Oct. 21 at Kane Hall on the University of Washington campus. Free tickets required from the University Book Store, 206-634-3400.

At the time, many Americans considered Ellsberg a traitor. He was not, nor in this book is he an apologist for the Communists or their system. He is a liberal. Liberals should like this book a lot — particularly now, when they seem unsure of their own bearings. Conservatives, who resented Ellsberg 30 years ago, might tackle "Secrets" with a new appreciation. His targets are just as often Democrats as Republicans, and one can easily accept his entire story as a tale of the mendacity of Big Government.

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